

Preserving Our State Parks



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For far too long, regular maintenance and desperately needed capital improvements at our state parks, wildlife management areas and historic sites have been deferred in the state's annual budgeting.

New Jersey's parks and open spaces offer a much-needed escape from our hectic daily lives. Our parks, especially in our older suburbs and crowded cities, provide families and children with a place for recreation, improve quality of life, and help create a sense of community. They offer a beautiful backdrop for exciting outdoor activities like camping, fishing and swimming. The recreational uses associated with parks generate economic benefits that contribute to New Jersey's multi-billion dollar tourism industry. The presence of parks increases property values and beautifies nearby neighborhoods. Parks also benefit our environment by providing wildlife habitat and safeguarding water quality. These treasures offer so much

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for so many. But they have also suffered from neglect and now they need our help.

For far too long, regular maintenance and desperately needed capital improvements at our state parks, wildlife management areas and historic sites have been deferred in the state's annual budgeting. Today, the inventory of projects needing attention has an estimated cost of approximately \$250 million. The list of projects needing

attention is pages long and covers the state from north to south and east to west. For the staff that tends to these sites and the public that appreciates them, it has been heart-breaking to see the work deferred for so long and it will take years for the state to catch up.

The list of necessary repairs include a \$2 million bulkhead repair project at Liberty State Park, where a section of the waterfront walkway has collapsed to \$1.5 million for structural repairs and restoration work at the Batsto Mansion in Wharton State Forest. In Warren County, the Hackettstown State Fish Hatchery has been closed to the public since 1985 because deferred maintenance has created safety concerns. In Belleplain State Forest, capital funds are needed to extend water lines to guarantee the future safety of the park's water supply.

Despite the overwhelming list of needed maintenance and upgrades, there is cause for hope. Thanks to decisive action by Governor Jon S. Corzine, our parks received a well-deserved boost in funding to address their most egregious problems. This past July, for the first time in years, Governor Corzine signed a budget that provides a down payment of \$9 million for these lands we hold in public trust. Even more important, the legislature authorized a constitutional amendment that the Governor and I helped craft, which will be put before voters this November. If passed, this amendment will provide a dedicated source of funds for maintenance and capital needs at the state's parks and wildlife management areas. The amendment would rededicate environmental funds generated by the Corporate Business Tax and provide \$15 million a year until 2015 and \$32 million annually beginning in 2016. And because it is a rededication of existing revenues, it would provide this funding without any additional taxes.

New Jersey state lands contain some of the most significant natural landscapes and historic sites in the state, accounting for more than 400,000 acres. With the recent proposal to cre-

Trenton, Paterson and River Edge, our state park system will grow to 42 parks, 11 forests, three recreation areas, 43 natural areas and more than 50 historic sites and districts. It also includes several marinas and a golf course.

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As the nation's most populated state, these scenic open spaces are in high demand. In the last 15 years, annual visitation to the state's parks, forests and historic sites has increased by nearly 50 percent. Over the past five years, an average of 15 million visitors per year used the state park system's sites and facilities. In 2005, that number climbed to more than 18 million people.

While the popularity of our parks has grown immensely, unfortunately, our ability to keep the parks in top condition has not. Without a stable source of funding it is virtually impossible to effectively plan and implement long-

range resource management or facility development projects. Years of neglect have led to a decline in the services provided at our parks, denying the public the enjoyment of all the opportunities our sites have to offer. This November's ballot question offers the opportunity to rectify this wrong, but, despite unanimous legislative support for placing this proposal before the voters, success cannot be taken for granted. The future of our parks, historic sites and wildlife management areas is in the voters' hands.

As local representatives you recognize firsthand what parks mean to our communities. I need your help to educate your constituents on the value of New Jersey's parks, what it provides to state residents and the importance of support for this ballot question. These open spaces attract residents, businesses, and economic activity to communities. They offer communities meeting places, recreational opportunities and spots to enjoy the tranquility of the outdoors. The public's support for this ballot initiative is critical in maintaining quality of life in our state. As their representatives and leaders, I ask you to remind your constituents when we invest in our parks, we are investing in New Jersey's future. ▲

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